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# CSI BATTLEBOOK

CSI BATTLEBOOK 21 A

DELIBERATE ATTACK, EXPLOITATION

Combat Studies Institute  
Fort Leavenworth, Kansas



**COMBAT  
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CSI BATTLEBOOK 21 A

DELIBERATE ATTACK, EXPLOITATION

Combat Studies Institute  
Fort Leavenworth, Kansas

# OPERATION COBRA

## DELIBERATE ATTACK, EXPLOITATION

### UNITS CONDUCTING OPERATION

ALLIED: 12th Army Group	GERMAN: 7th Army
1st Army	LXXXIV Corps
3rd Army	116 PZ DIV
VIII Corps	91st Div (elm)
4th Armored Division	

PREPARED BY: Staff Group 21 A - Group Leader MAJ(P) Jim Schmidt  
(for staff member contributions see contents)

Submitted to the Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and  
General Staff College, in fulfillment of the requirements for  
subcourse P651, Battle Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

COMMON REFERENCE: U.S. <sup>4th</sup> Armored Division Operations July-  
September 1944

TYPE OF OPERATION: Deliberate Attack, Exploitation

### OPPOSING FORCES:

ALLIED: 12th Army Group	GERMAN: 7th Army
1st Army	LXXXIV Corps
3rd Army	116 PZ Division
VII Corps	91st Division
	(elm)

4th Armored Division

SYNOPSIS: The breakout from the Normandy beachhead and the subsequent pursuit of German forces which came to a temporary halt at the West Wall took place from 25 July - 12 September 1944. The operation was characterized by rapid, independent operations conducted by individual armored combat commands. The principle antagonists were the Allied Forces under the direction of General Eisenhower and the German Oberbefehlshaber (Theater Headquarters) West.

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Herder-Druck, 1946.

Pattison, LTC Hal C. "The Operations of Combat Command A,

4th Armored Division, From the Normandy Beachhead to the  
Meuse River, 28 July to 31 August 1944", paper presented

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Regular Course, Ft. Leavenworth, KS, 1946-47.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Fourty-eight days after the Allied invasion at Normandy, Eisenhower's forces were still bottled-up on the beachhead. Although they had managed to land sufficient personnel and equipment to theoretically accomplish their OVERLORD plan, the lack of Allied progress was generating concern that the situation might result in a static warfare scenario reminiscent of World War I. This concern was short-lived, however. On 25 July 1944, the Allies kicked-off Operation COBRA, initially a limited-objective operation; it ultimately resulted in a decisive Allied breakout through the difficult hedgerow country of the Brittany Peninsula. Subsequently, Allied Forces spearheaded by the 4th Armored Division, in a classic example of a combined arms operation, were to drive the Germans eastward to the West Wall where the Allied advance was temporarily stalled in mid-September 1944. (see MAP A for the Area of Operation).

There is a wealth of information available to the researcher about Operation COBRA and follow-on operations. These sources encompass books, after-action reports, operation plans, and transcripts of interviews. Primary resource material is listed in the Bibliography. Additional resources are also indicated in the Endnotes which are located at the end of each subchapter.

Principal among the primary sources are the three books listed and evaluated below:



- Blumenson, Martin, Breakout and Pursuit, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1961.

Breakout and Pursuit is one volume in the series dedicated to a history of the US Army in World War II. Martin Blumenson (BA, Bucknell, 1940, MA, Harvard, 1942) was commissioned in the US Army and served as a historical officer in the Third and Seventh Armies in the European Theatre of Operations. Recalled to active duty in 1950 during the Korean War, he began work on Breakout and Pursuit in 1952 while assigned to the Office of the Chief of Military History. Both Allied and German operational records were researched and analyzed in this effort. Martin Blumenson fulfilled two objectives: the book provides an excellent operational study of the breakout from the Normandy beachhead designed to challenge the career soldier, and at the same time, has an exhilarating appeal to the general reader who may be interested in this classic campaign.

- Koyen, Kenneth. The Fourth Armored Division: From the Beach to Gavarria, Munich: Herder-Druck, 1946.

The Fourth Armored Division is an operational history of that division written by the division Public Affairs Officer immediately after the War. It is a fascinating, inspiring account of this division's race across the European continent. The story is told by the men who fought with the Fourth Armored, and is dedicated to those who died while fighting with their division.

- Balwin, Hanson W. Tiger Jack. Fort Collins, Colorado:  
The Old Army Press, 1979.

Tiger Jack is a study of leadership based on General Wood's unpublished memoirs, supplemented by official records and interviews provided by his contemporaries and subordinate who served with the Fourth Armored. If the above sources describe what the Fourth Armored accomplished, this book explains why. It was simply the best trained and best led division that the US Army has ever placed on a battlefield--anytime, anywhere.

The primary difficulty in preparing this analysis was to separate and follow those forces which took part in Operation COBRA and the subsequent penetration to the West Wall. For this reason the study necessarily focused on the Fourth Armored Division.

## II. THE STRATEGIC SETTING

On the morning of 6 June 1944 an allied force of U. S., British, and Canadian soldiers invaded 'Fortress Europe' along a 50 mile stretch of the Normandy coast from Caen westward to the base of the Cotentin Peninsula. This invasion, which represented the third front against Nazi Germany's forces (after Russian and Italy), resulted in heavy fighting along the hedgerow country of France as the Allies attempted to establish and expand their beachhead. Expansion of the beachhead was so slow that by 24 July the Allied forces held only one-fifth of the area assigned to them and had lost, in the first 48 days of the invasion, an estimated 122,000 casualties with German losses estimated at 117,000.

By the seventh week of the invasion, fierce German resistance had contained the Allied beachhead to about 20 miles inland from the Normandy beaches. To break out of the rugged hedgerow country inland from the beaches, the First U.S. Army staff developed Operation COBRA, a plan designed to pierce the German line with massed power along a narrow front.

By the third week of July 1944 the major U.S. forces in the Normandy beachhead preparing for Operation COBRA included the First U.S. Army, commanded by General Omar Bradley, the VII Corps, commanded by General Lawton Collins, and the V, VIII, and XIX Corps. Each of these corps was composed of infantry and armor divisions, supported by

artillery and innumerable combat support and combat service support elements. Among the combat divisions preparing for Operation COBRA and the breakout was the fresh but untested 4th Armored Division, commanded by Major General John S. Wood.

Although the 4th Armored Division was unbloodied in combat, it had a background of training that made it a smooth, disciplined, efficient division before it heard an enemy gun fire. For the most part the soldiers of the division were Easterners with more men from New York than any other state. Although the division included men from all the states, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Ohio, Massachusetts, Illinois and Indiana contributed large portions of the division's original manpower.

Opposing the Allies in France were elements of the German Seventh Army and Panzer Group West, including the LXXXIV Corps and the II Parachute Corps. American intelligence in July 1944 estimated that only about 17,000 combat troops and less than 100 tanks were facing the American VII and VIII Corps prior to the start of Operation COBRA. While the German forces were combat experienced, they suffered from a shortage of oil and fuel, experienced drivers, all types of ammunition, and manpower. In addition, American intelligence believed that the LXXXIV Corps and II Parachute Corps did not possess local reserves capable of intervening effectively against Operation COBRA and that the enemy corps, while controlling several units, possessed few troops. Hence, American intelligence claimed in late July 1944 that the probable enemy course of action in France seemed to be a

gradual withdrawal of forces accompanied by strong delaying actions in terrain favorable to the defense.

Facing a weakened German defense, Operation COBRA jumped off 25 July 1944 behind a bomb carpet in which allied airplanes dropped 4,200 tons of bombs in an area approximately 2,500 by 6,000 yards west of Saint Lo as General Collins' VII Corps launched the main assault. Operation COBRA and the breakout from the Normandy beachhead had commenced.

### III. THE TACTICAL SITUATION

The Area of Operations - Climate and weather - The summer of 1944 had not been particularly hot, but it had been and was to be unusually and frustratingly wet. Approaching Operation COBRA, the month of June had brought heavy rainfall<sup>1</sup> and early to mid-July had seen lots of overcast, rain-filled skies over the Normandy peninsula.<sup>2</sup> The abundant rainfall not only aggravated travel in the lowlands and marshes of the peninsula, but the overcast skies had hindered observation for artillery supporting fires and prevented badly needed support from the Allied heavy bombers, fighter-bombers and attack aircraft. Commanders and troops alike "waited anxiously for sunshine".<sup>3</sup>

Allied forecasters finally predicted a break in the weather for 24 July, a break which would permit Allied aircraft to provide the heavy bombardment planned to kickoff Operation COBRA. Unfortunately the morning broke to an overcast sky, thick with clouds over the Normandy peninsula. The weather led to the postponement of Operation COBRA, but not before Allied bombs had been dropped mistakenly on Allied forces and killed not only 25 men of the 30th Division but possibly any chance of surprise for Operation COBRA.<sup>4</sup>

The weather did break enough on 25 July to allow Allied aircraft to provide the planned bombardment, but low ceilings forced the aircraft to fly at only 12,000 feet, closer to enemy anti-aircraft fires, leading again to bombs falling short of the intended targets and the loss of more Allied lives, including that of Lt Gen Lesley J. McNair.<sup>5</sup>

The weather, however, had finally broken and the wretched conditions that earlier had hampered operations in Normandy vanished with the launching of Operation COBRA; "the weather turned fair, and the last days of July were" generally "characterized by brilliant sunshine and warm temperatures".<sup>6</sup> This perhaps more than anything assisted the success of the breakout, for it permitted a close and effective cooperation to develop between the pilots of the fighter-bombers and the tankers leading the ground forces. From 26 July through the end of the month, over 400 support missions were flown over First Army spearheads.<sup>7</sup>

The good weather that finally arrived at the end of July continued into August and generally meant excellent flying weather to support ground operations. On the ground however the weather had turned hot and dry, and from early to mid-August the new problems were the dust and grit raised by the mechanized columns as they traveled across the sun-baked earth.<sup>8</sup> This dry, clear weather generally lasted from the end of July into mid-August, although good weather on one front did not always signify the same on another. There were instances when badly needed tactical air support was grounded at the home base because of cloudy weather, or early morning rain and haze obscured visibility for the soldiers on the ground, especially in the lowland areas and on the marshes.

The break in the good weather came toward the middle of the

month, and "the torrential rain"<sup>9</sup> that fell about midnight on 19 August signaled a return to concern about needed air support and trouble with artillery fire observation. Weather problems existed throughout the area and hampered operations. A heavy rain set in around midnight on 20 August and enabled thousands of Germans to escape to safety from the Argentan-Falaise pocket.<sup>10</sup> Thick fog set in over the Allied airfields in Britain and caused cancellation of a planned drop of badly needed ammunition and arms for the FFI.<sup>11</sup> Allied forces completed the liberation of Paris in a heavy downpour that later broke off to a drizzle,<sup>12</sup> while fog, rain, and wind squalls during the last week of August restricted air support, including resupply of artillery ammunition during the operations at Brest.<sup>13</sup>

The weather broke for a short time between 2 and 7 September, during which time medium and heavy bombers were able to provide support operations against Brest "every day but one."<sup>14</sup> In September the weather was less dependable, and the cancelled air support missions of one day were often flown the following day. From 25 August to 19 September, VIII Corps received continuous air support, except during the periods of inclement weather, allowing fighter-bombers on alert status alone to fly approximately "430 support missions involving more than 3200 sorties", much better than in the early days of the summer.<sup>15</sup>

Terrain - The terrain encountered by the Allied forces during Operation COBRA and the subsequent pursuit to the West Wall encompassed different major regions - that of the bocage country of



the Cotentin, the port areas of the Brittany peninsula, and then the more open rolling terrain, east toward Paris and beyond, that included several important river obstacles.

During the breakthrough of Operation COBRA, the dominant terrain feature encountered by the Allies was the hedgerow. With the exception of the Caen-Falaise plain, the battlefield had a compartmented appearance caused by the many hedgerowed fields that were bound to impose severe travel limitations on Allied forces' mobility.<sup>16</sup> The hedgerow that created this compartmented feature was a fence, comprised half of earth and half of hedge. The base of this terrain wall was a dirt parapet that could vary in thickness from one to four feet or more and in height from three to twelve feet. Growing out of the wall was a hedge of brambles, hawthorne, vines and trees, which could vary in thickness from one to three feet and in height from three to fifteen feet. The hedges were constructed to delineate the separate fields and therefore broke the terrain into innumerable walled enclosures. These enclosed fields were quite small, often only 200 by 400 yards in size, and because the fields were often of irregular shape, the hedgerows thus followed no logical pattern. Each hedgerow had at least one opening into the field, but not all fields had openings that opened onto a road, and traveling therefore between hedgerowed fields often meant having to follow small wagon paths through several adjacent small fields to cross from one road to another. From a tactical view point each field was a tiny terrain compartment, with several adjoining fields forming natural defensive positions and alternate positions echeloned in depth. The

thick vegetation of the hedges and the abundant trees provided the defender effective camouflage, obstructed observation, hindered the adjustment of artillery and heavy weapons fires, and limited both the movement and employment of armor and supporting arms.<sup>17</sup> The fact that the Germans employed only about 76 medium and heavy tanks in the region (versus about 400 tanks in this more open terrain in the British sector) attested to the difficulty of travel in the hedgerowed terrain.<sup>18</sup> The hedgerows subdivided the terrain nicely into small rectangular fields<sup>19</sup> which favored the defense and provided the enemy with natural defensive positions, with abundant alternate positions, all echeloned in depth.<sup>20</sup> The hedgerows proved to be a major obstacle to Allied military operations, one which inflicted a psychological toll on the combat forces and caused a cautious behavior not easily dissipated either by an order or an air strike.<sup>21</sup> The battle of the hedgerows was in General Bradley's words "tough and costly" and "too slow a process",<sup>22</sup> one that often had a bad effect on morale.

However, the hedgerows did have positive aspects. Many interesting and effective hedgecutting and/or clearing techniques were devised to counter the obstacle, the most effective of which was the "Rhino tank".<sup>23</sup> Another advantage of the hedgerowed fields on Allied use of armor was that the terrain "neutralized to a great extent the ability of the Tiger's 88mm guns to penetrate an American tank at 2,500 yards". Tanks were generally engaged at distances as close as between 150 and 400 yards, ranges at which the smaller and more maneuverable Sherman tank enjoyed a distinct superiority.<sup>24</sup>

The effect of the hedgerows was to subdivide the terrain into small rectangular compartments which not only favored the defense, but necessitated their reduction individually by an attacker. "The entire operation resolved itself into a series of jungle or Indian fighting, in which the individual soldier or small groups of soldiers"<sup>25</sup> played a dominant part. Success came to the attacking force which employed the maximum initiative by individuals and small groups.<sup>26</sup>

The Brittany peninsula played an important part in Allied strategy because of the key ports and natural harbors it possessed. The Allies felt that a basic requirement for success of the military operations on the continent lay in securing a continental port capacity sufficient to support the forces required to defeat the Germans. Such ports as those of St. Malo, Brest, Lorient, St Nazaire, Nantes, and the many small harbors and protected coves were key to the logistical sustainment of the Allied offensive.<sup>27</sup>

The terrain of the Brittany peninsula was dominated by a major plateau running west to east down the center of the peninsula from the port city of Brest to the city of Rennes.<sup>28</sup> An extensive road network supported movement about the Brittany peninsula and aided the Allied forces in their breakout through Avranches. A key city on the peninsula was Rennes, a hub of an extensive road network, where no less than ten major highways converged.<sup>29</sup>

However, the peninsula was dotted with many small streams flowing between high rocky banks. The major portion of the area was rough and difficult for the proper tactical employment of armor because of the many defiles and sharp elevations. The extensive road

network was thus the more important to Allied movement, but at the same time meant engaging in combat from a long column formation.<sup>30</sup>

The major objectives of the Allied operations on the peninsula were to secure port facilities to support the operations. Although the peninsula had several large commercial ports, one of the key areas sought was the harbor inside the Quiberon peninsula. Here there were four ports (including the harbors of Auray and Vannes), "an excellent rail and road network, hard beaches with gentle gradients, and sheltered anchorages"<sup>31</sup> offering protection to ocean-going vessels from the harsh Atlantic winds.<sup>32</sup> But to benefit from any of the facilities of the Brittany ports, the Allies would first have to defeat the German forces that held them, and many of the port cities like Brest and St Malo were heavily defended. For example, at Brest the German forces had improved upon old French fortifications in and around the city, and large, deep, artificial caves in the surrounding rocky terrain afforded the defenders shellproof shelters against the stiffest Allied air and artillery bombardments.<sup>33</sup>

Away from both the bocage country of the Cotentin area and the plateaued coastal area of the Brittany peninsula, the Allied forces encountered many areas enroute to Paris and east toward the West Wall which were open plains devoid of cover in many areas. The Argentan plain and the Dives River valley were open land almost devoid of cover. The dominating terrain near le Bourge-St. Leonard provided excellent observation over a large portion of the Dives River valley.<sup>34</sup> The terrain in the Argentan-Falaise pocket, except for a woodland running along the watershed between the Orne and Dives River

valleys, offered little cover. "The roads were like chalk marks on a billiard table, in plain view of Allied aircraft and artillery observers."<sup>35</sup> The area between the Seine and the Loire Rivers offered an open, level plain ideally suited for armor operations. The chalk plateaus around the towns of Evreux, Dreux, Chartres and Chateaudun provided excellent sites for Allied aircraft. Security of these area, especially for the airfield sites, was considered an essential preliminary to the breakout of the lodgement area and pursuit toward Paris and the West Wall.<sup>36</sup>

Major obstacles to Allied operations were presented by some of the many major forest areas, like the Foret de Parseigne, a densely wooded area, extending for almost ten miles and in which at least two German divisions could find concealment,<sup>37</sup> and the Foret d'Ecouvres, larger still, both of which were on the avenue of approach north of Le Mans toward Paris. Closer to Paris was the Foret de Rambouillet which confronted the Allies with thick woods, steep hills and many neighboring small villages which afforded the enemy excellent opportunities for road blocks, mine fields and ambush.<sup>38</sup>

From Orleans westward, the Loire River was a major barrier and was the obstacle upon which the southern flank of the Allied Armies was rested. South of Paris and east of Orleans, a series of smaller rivers presented substantial barriers to the advancing Allied forces in their movement toward the east.<sup>39</sup> And yet at each river, the Loing, the Yonne, the Seine, the Aube, the Marne, the Moselle, and the Meuse, though these water obstacles offered excellent defensive opportunities, the rapidly withdrawing Germans were not able to

organize serious resistance<sup>40</sup> and in many instances were not even able to destroy the many bridges which would have delayed Allied movement forward. As key as capturing these many bridges in tact was to Allied rate of momentum, energetic reconnaissance usually quickly found either another bridge not destroyed by the Germans or a suitable place at which to quickly ford the river.<sup>41</sup>

The final obstacle to Allied exploitation of the breakout was the West Wall itself a formidable obstacle in World War I, the West Wall was no longer the impressive shield it had once been. The Germans had neglected and partially dismantled it and had stripped most of its armaments for use at the Atlantic Wall. Yet it had remained an important psychological barrier for both the Allied forces and the Germans as well.<sup>42</sup>

In summary, the terrain played probably the larger part in determining the manner of this military operation. First in the hedgerows and marshy areas of the Cotentin, then in the rugged stream bedded terrain of Brittany, and finally through the major rivered terrain of north, central France, one of the key terrain features affecting the rate of the Allied breakout and pursuit was use of the often extensive road networks. Whether it was because of the restrictive nature of the terrain or the desire for speed of pursuit of a fleeing enemy, the road network of France played an important part for the combat forces, just as it did in the miraculous accomplishments of the Red Ball express in maintaining General Patton's supply lines.

## ENDNOTES

1. Martin Blumenson, Breakout and Pursuit, (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1961), p. 201.
2. IBID. p. 210.
3. IBID.
4. IBID, pp 228-229.
5. IBID, pp 233-235.
6. IBID, page 333, taken from VIII Corps After Action Report, Aug 44.
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11. IBID, p. 599.
12. IBID, p. 612.
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14. IBID, p. 643.
15. IBID, p. 653.
16. IBID, p. 11.
17. IBID, pp. 11-12.
18. IBID, p. 30.
19. U.S. Army, HQ, 9th Infantry Division, "Report of Operations", 14 July 1944, Annex 2, Page 1.
20. Blumenson, Breakout and Pursuit, p. 267.
21. IBID, pp. 245-246.
22. IBID, p. 213.

23. IBID, pp. 205-207.
24. IBID, p. 205.
25. 9th Inf Div, Report of Operations, Annex 2, p. 1.
26. IBID.
27. Blumenson, Breakout and Pursuit, page 346.
28. IBID, p. 348.
29. IBID, p. 357.
30. LTC H. C. Pattison, "The Operation of CC 'A', 4th Armored Division, Normandy Beachhead to the Meuse River", Cavalry Command and Staff College, 1946-47, pp 10-11.
31. Blumenson, Breakout and Pursuit, p. 346.
32. IBID.
33. IBID, p. 387.
34. IBID, p. 525.
35. IBID, p. 534.
36. IBID, pp 563-564.
37. IBID, p. 500.
38. IBID, p. 588.
39. Pattison, "The Operations of CC 'A',...", pp. 12-13.
40. Blumenson, Breakout and Pursuit, p. 664.
41. IBID, p 566.
42. IBID, p 677.



Comparison of Opposing Forces (The Allies) - Strength and Composition

- The allied forces that participated in Operation COBRA are as listed below:

4th Armored Div, MG John S. Wood  
8th Tank Bn, LTC Edgar T. Conky, Jr.  
35th Tank Bn, LTC Bill Bailey  
37th Tank Bn, LTC Creighton W. Abrams  
10th Amd Inf Bn, LTC Graham Kirkpatrick  
51st Amd Inf Bn, LTC Al A. Maybank  
53rd Amd Inf Bn, LTC George L. Jaques  
24th Amd Engr Bn, LTC Louis W. Roth  
2d Amd FA Bn, LTC Arthur C. Peterson  
66th Amd FA Bn, LTC Neil M. Wallace  
94th Amd FA Bn, LTC Alexander Graham  
25th Cav Recon Sqdn, (Mech), LTC Leslie D. Goodell  
126th Amd Ord Maint Bn, LTC Richard B. Euler  
46th Amd Med Bn, LTC Robert LW. Mailland  
HHB, Div Arty, COL Ernest A. Bixby  
CA, HHC, COL Bruce C. Clarke  
CCB, HHC, BG Dager, Holmes E.  
RES CMD, COL Louis J. Storck 28 July (KIA), COL Waler A. Bigby  
Div Hq Co, CPT Nelson D. Warwick  
489th Antiaircraft Arty (AW) Bn (SP), LTC Allen M. Murphy  
144th Amd Sig Co, CPT Lucis E. Trosdoir  
4th Amd Div MP Plt  
704th TK Dest Bn, LTC Delk M Oden

Technology (The Allies) - The 4th Armored Division had a varied mix of weapons during Operation COBRA.

The mainstay of the Division Armored force was the M-4 Sherman medium tank weighing 30 tons and mounting a 75mm low velocity gun. This weapon system although undergunned had the advantage of speed and maneuverability which gave it at best parity against the larger, heavier gunned tanks of the German forces. Later in the operation the 4th Armored Division received new M4A2 tanks, with a 75mm high velocity main gun. Another version, the M-4A3 became available and it mounted a 90mm high velocity gun which was the equal of any of the enemy's weapons.<sup>2</sup>

The division also had a number of highly maneuverable light tanks the M-5 with a 37mm gun and later an M-24 with a 75mm gun.<sup>3</sup>

The Field Artillery had 105mm (M-7 KSP), 105mm (M-2)(Towed), 155mm (M-12)(SP) and 155mm (M-1)(Towed) weapons systems which proved quite effective in support of the fast moving operation. Firing HE and WP the artillery was responsible for extensive destruction of enemy defensive positions along the Division route of march.<sup>4</sup>

Early in the operation hedgerows presented a dangerous and almost impregnable barrier to armored movement. Several adaptations were invented by members of units attempting to negotiate the hedgerows. The most widely used device was mounted on the front of a tank (called the "Rhino Tank") the tank was driven up to the hedgerow, the device penetrated the base of the row, lifted the growth thereby breaking base and allowing the tank to roll through the hegerow.<sup>5</sup>

What the 4th Armored Division lacked in weight and fire power

it made up for with speed, maneuverability and sound employment techniques. Another development which enhanced the Divisions combat power was the introduction of an improved 76mm High velocity armor piercing round for their M-78 Tank Destroyers. This added to the firepower of the M-36 90mm Tank Destroyer gave the force a viable anti armor capability. These weapons proved invaluable to the Division in its whirlwind push through the enemy defenses.<sup>6</sup>

Lessons learned (Third U.S. Army) - Artillery supporting Cavalry -  
supporting artillery attached to cavalry units contributed immeasurably to the effectiveness of the cavalry. At times when the cavalry was given large zones screening the Divisional flanks and front one or two field artillery batteries, 105mm howitzer (SP) should be attached to or placed in support of these cavalry squadrons.<sup>7</sup>

Time fire or Pozit Ammunition as an aid - The employment of time fire or Pozit ammunition to cover the approach to bridges in many cases provide a means of capturing bridges intact. The intention of the enemy to blow a bridge at the last moment is nullified by taking the bridge under fire in this sector ten to fifteen minutes before the arrival of tanks and thus enable the Divisional forces to seize the bridge intact. Damage to the bridges was found to be negligible and yet the enemy was prevented from placing demolitions or detonating ones already implaced.<sup>8</sup> Armored Division 155mm Howitzers - It is desirable to have a battalion of 155mm howitzers (SP) as an organic part of an Armored Division.<sup>9</sup>

Logistics -- Logistics support of the 4th Armored Division was difficult at best. Long lines of communication, rapid movement and by passed every position created problems for the logisticians supporting the Division. All classes of supply were available to the unit early in the operation, but as the unit became more heavily involved distributions became more of a problem. The transportation of supplies from army depots to forward distribution points. From these points the suppliers had difficulty transporting the necessary materials. Classes III and V were provided as needed but the remainder of the supplies were not as easily distributed.<sup>10</sup>

The average distance of the Division supply lines was 30-40 miles and greater as some units pushed far ahead. The support manpower requirement was generally 1 service to 4 combat personnel. Vehicular support was 4 service to 1 combat. The average daily maintenance requirement of all classes of supply was approximately 600 tons. The average daily breakdown by individual was:

Class I	6.65 lbs.
Class III	8.2 lbs.
Class II & IV	5.3 lbs.
Class V	8. lbs.

The method of distribution for all classes of supply is:

Class I - Supply point distribution from Army and the Division QM drew the supplies for delivery forward. Traffic congestion and idle

vehicles continuously plagued the logisticians.

Class III - Supply point distribution with the source distribution procedure as Class I.

Class II & IV - Supply point distribution with delivery from the point to forward units by Division QM assets. Sparse parts for mechanical smoke generator equipment and 4.2 "untas were critically short. Engineer Class II & IV supplies were unique problems and will be addressed individually.

Class II - Class II items were issued to the Division Engineers on a replacement or exchange basis at the army engineer depot.

Class IV - Class IV items, except for critically short items, were issued from depots or dumps to the Division Engineers. Critically short items were rigidly controlled by the army engineer and were released only on his approval. Ordnance Class II and IV items were supplied to the Division by the Army ordnance officer. Replacement items were issued complete with all accessories. Replacement combat vehicles were issued combat loaded, including ammunition. Ordnance Class II and IV included all major items, tools, spare parts and supplies listed in the Table of Equipment. Medical Class II and IV supplies were issued by the 1st Medical Depot Company directly to the division.

Class V - Engineer Class V items were issued and delivered from ASPs which were mobile for the most part.

Ordnance Class V - a determined effort was made to maintain the Divisions authorized basic load with a liberal overload policy for heavily committed units. If at all possible ammunition was never abandoned at gun positions or knocked out vehicles.<sup>11</sup>

Command, Control, and Communications Systems -- Formation at the combat commands A and B enhanced the combat power of the 4th Armored Division allowing them to place that increased effort in critical sectors. Experienced commanders and battle wise soldiers filled the ranks of the divisional units. Their state of training and dedication were the driving forces in there extensive successes. General Wood felt an affinity toward General Patton because of kinship that permeated the ranks of Patton tankers. He (Wood) was convinced that he understood what Patton wanted better than he understood General Middleton who was an infantryman. Woods' division had been relatively untouched in the hedgerows and had not sustained heavy losses that were normal in the Cotentin. Having thrust victoriously to Avranches in the last days of July, Wood believed he had accomplished what other units had not been able to do. Having let the 4th Armored from the break through into the breakout, Wood and his units became infected with an enthusiasm and a self-confidence that were perfectly suited to exploitation but proved to be a headache to those who sought to retain a semblance of control.<sup>12</sup>

Rapidly changing situations created problems for the commanders trying to pass orders. The interval between the sending of a

X

message and the receipt of its acknowledgement from the corps to the Division and from Wood's headquarters to subordinate units usually exceeded twenty-four to thirty-six hours.<sup>13</sup>

In the face of these difficulties, confusion and misunderstanding were inevitable. Having unit run communications in the interest of exploitations, the division commander found it difficult to understand why his messages to corps were apparently being ignored, when he received so little assistance and guidance. Needing to react quickly to fast-changing situations, he could not wait for orders. General Wood, later recalled, "The situation at the time...was extremely fluid. I had to make decisions on my own responsibility, since there were no orders from higher authority. Of course, everything went according to plan; but at the time no one in the higher circles had yet discovered just how... the plan (fitted) ...the events...We were moving on our own. We could not wait for directions or objections to be passed down from higher authority." Although these situations appear to present insurmountable obstacles the 4th Armored Division did have a great degree of success and accomplishment all of their assigned missions in a superb manner.<sup>15</sup>

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### Comparison of Combat Effectiveness (The Germans)

Strength and Composition - By midnight of July 17-18 1944, the 4th Armored Division was to take over the front held by the 4th Division, north of Raids and just south of Carentan.<sup>1</sup> The 4th Armored Division held the small sector between the 83rd Division on the east and the 90th Division on the west.<sup>2</sup> The German front line opposing the US VIII Corps as of 21 July 1944, was the LXXXIV Corps, Seventh Army, Army Group B, OB West. The LXXXIV Corps consisted of, from west to east, the 243 Division, 91 Division, 2d SS Panzer Division, 17 SS Panzer Grenadier Division, elements of the 5th Parachute Division, 353 Division, remnants of the Panzer Lehr Division and the 275 Division.<sup>3</sup> The unit directly opposing the 4th Armored Division was the 2nd SS Panzer Division 'Das Reich.'

The 2nd SS Panzer Division was originally organized in 1944 as follows:<sup>4</sup>

Division HQ	140 men	32 vehicles	8 X motorcycles
SS-PZ REGT 2	1,770 men	313 vehicles	62 X Pz KW V
'DAS REICH'			64 X Pz KW IV
			8 X 3.7cm FLAK
			6 X 20mm FLAK
			53 X motorcycles
SS-Pz-GREN REGT 3			
'DEUTSCHLAND'	3,340 men	527 vehicles	88 X motorcycles
			6 X 15cm Gun/Howitzer
			12 X 10.5cm
			Gun/Howitzer

24 X FLAMETHROWER

12 X 12cm Mortar

SS-Pz-Gren Regt 4 (same as Regt 3, above)

'DER FUHRER'

SS-INF-REGT (same as Regt 3, but lacking half tracks)

'LANGEMARCH'

SS-PzART REGT 2 2,167 men 534 vehicles 12 X 17cm Gun/Howitzer

6 X 15cm SP Gun

12 X 15cm SP Gun

12 X 10.5cm

Gun/Howitzer

40 motorcycles

SS-FLAK ABT 2 824 men 181 vehicles 12 X 8.8 cm

18 X 20mm

16 motorcycles

SS-NblW ABT 2 473 men 107 vehicles 18 X NblW

8 motorcycles

SS-StuG ABT 2 344 men 100 vehicles 22 X STUG III/IV

11 motorcycles

SS-Pz Jag Abt2 513 men 135 vehicles 31 X 7.5cm SP Gun

12 X PAK 40

17 motorcycles

SS-Reece Abt 2 942 men 199 vehicles 13 X 7.5cm SP Gun

35 X 20mm PAK

6 Flamethrower

22 motorcycles

SS-Pi Abt 2	984 men 212 vehicles	3 X 20/28mm PAK
		3 X 20mm PAK
		20 Flamethrower
		52 motorcycles

SS-SIG Abt 2	515 men 114 vehicles	14 motorcycles
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(The above figures are for the division at full establishment.

Excluded are medical and MP units, etc.)

The division was formed in the winter of 1940/41 as a Panzer Grenadier Division and fought in the Balkans and in Russia. Reformed in France in the summer of 1942 as a Panzer Division. It returned to Russia and suffered heavy losses late in 1943. Reformed again in the spring of 1944 near Bordeaux. The division is reported to have contained Alsatians, Walloons and Roumanians and was believed to be up to full strength at the beginning of its commitment. It was first committed on the British sector on 27/28 June, and then transferred to the American sector. The Division was good but its combat efficiency was not considered superior.<sup>5</sup>

Commander: Oberfueher LAMMERDING

Composition:

2D SS Panzer Regt 'Das Reich' CO: LT Col Tychsen

3D SS Pz Gren Regt 'DEUTSCHLAND' CO: COL Wyslizeny

4th SS Pz Gren Regt 'Der Fueher' CO: COL Stadler or Otto

Weidinger

2d SS Engr Bn 'Das Reich' CO: CAPT Broso

2d SS Pz Arty Regt 'Das Reich'

2d SS Rcn Bn 'Das Reich'

2d SS AT Bn or Co

2d SS AA Bn 'Das Reich'

The division estimated strength was only estimated for the 3d Bn SS Deutschland at 200 men and the 2d SS Engineer Bn at 400 men <sup>6</sup>

The actual strength of total German forces opposing/facing both the VII and VIII Corps were estimated to number no more than 17,000 men with less than 100 tanks in support-a slight force to resist the power of more than 5 times that strength assembled for COBRA<sup>7</sup> The G-2 of the Third Army in his 22 July enemy situation report estimated that the present enemy strength disposed in front of the Army was at a maximum of 15,000 infantry, 90 artillery pieces and 40 to 50 tanks and assault guns. In immediate reserve, in the vicinity of Coutances, the enemy had an estimated 10,000 infantry and 125 tanks.<sup>8</sup>

The reserves mentioned above were at the Corps level. The Germans had delayed too long in bringing their reinforcements to Normandy. Brittany had already been denuded of troops. When the American armored columns struck southwards out of Normandy toward Rennes, there was no defense in depth. The withdrawal from Normandy became too hasty to permit any withdrawal to an organized line.<sup>9</sup> Reserves were minimal, at best.

Technology - (The Germans) - The thick hedgerows and small fields of the bocage that characterized this part of France was considered poor tank country. Rommel had stated that he wished to avoid tank versus tank engagements, even though his tanks were technically superior. He understood the significance of the Allies overbearing weight in material<sup>10</sup>

Gen Lt Bayerlein, in response to a question on how he organized the defense in the St. Lo area answered the question this way. "On the basis of my experience near Caen, I did not believe we could do anything with tanks; therefore we simply used them as armored antitank guns or armored machine guns. The terrain was unsuitable for tanks, especially the MARK V, so we camouflaged them, and, with the crew still inside, fixed our weapons when attached. There was no possibility of moving on the battlefield, they had to stand and fight. Air attack contributed largely to this. A whole company of tanks was shot up, one after the other, near St. Jean de -Daye (near Carentan) while they were hemmed in on the road. The long barreled guns impaired the maneuverability of the tanks."<sup>11</sup>

The German tank employed in large numbers in Western Europe was the Mark IV, a medium tank of 23 tons with a 75mm gun. The standard combat vehicle of tank battalions in Panzer Divisions, it presented no frightening aspect of invulnerability. The MARK V (Panther) weighed 45 tons and carried a high velocity 75mm gun. It appeared in Normandy during June 1944 in limited numbers and had good effect. Panthers were beginning to be distributed to tank battalions organic to Panzer Divisions. The Allies encountered the Mark VI (Tiger) in North Africa and experienced the devastating effects of its superior firepower. The Mark VI weighed 56 tons and mounted an 88mm gun. The fact that this tank was being introduced into the Western European theater was hardly a reassuring fact to the Allies. The Tiger was reserved for separate battalions, distributed on the basis of

one battalion to a Panzer Corps. Reports of a modified Mark VI, the King or Royal Tiger, weighing 7 tons, mounting an improved 88mm gun, beginning to appear in the West, increasing Allied concern.

At the end of June the apparent superiority of German tanks seemed particularly serious. Allied intelligence estimated that 230 Mark IV, 150 Mark V and 40 Mark VI tanks faced the Allies. When these forces were added to the tanks of three elite divisions assembled 100 miles west of Paris (about 200 Mark IV, 150 Mark V and 80 Mark VI tanks) they constituted a sizable armor force. Although these armored forces were not all directly arrayed against the 4th Armored Division, the threat of their presence and the German ability to reinforce weak points on their line posed a constant problem for the attacking commanders.

As Panzer divisions reached Normandy, one by one they had to be flung in to hold the line; even amongst the thick of the dreaded bocage where a short range anti-tank weapon could kill a tank with as much ease as a long-range high velocity gun. Here, the little, hand-held, bazooka type infantry anti-tank weapons, armed with a hollow-charge warhead, took their toll of tanks from both sides. Here, too, assault-guns could defend effectively and here mines hampered the operations of each side. Throughout, the Allies managed to build up their forces at a greater rate than the Germans but in the bocage, where the close packed contestants rarely presented a vulnerable front to each other, each attack became head-on, the defense held sway and the greater firepower and superior armor of the German vehicles gave them more than an edge in every encounter with

their opposite number. The Allies' Sherman tanks, were no match for Panthers and Tigers. In numbers alone were the Allies superior.<sup>12</sup>

For all their technical superiority, the Germans envied the Allies their numbers, and the fact that the Germans could only field assault-guns to support their infantry formations, when the Allies could afford to use tanks with their greater offensive capability.<sup>13</sup>

Logistical and Administrative Systems (The Germans)- The US and British Air Forces were masters in the air and crippled all German air activity, especially reconnaissance. Satisfactory aerial photos could no longer be obtained. Air combat forces for defense against the almost incessant hostile air penetration were not available, not even when concentrated as if for a main effort. The technically superior enemy fighter bombers neutralized practically all traffic during the day and took their toll. Heavy bomber formations destroyed rail and highway junctions. Destruction of railways west of the line Brussels-Paris-Orleans made regulated railway supply impossible as early as mid-May 44. Lack of loading space and gasoline prevented shifting to highway supply. The Seine bridges below Paris and the Loire bridge below Orleans were destroyed by air before 6 June 44 and subsurface bridges had not been built, though they were requested.<sup>14</sup>

The difficulties of the supply during the whole battle for France were caused exclusively by the effect of the enemy air force. The fact that all movements of supply were forced to be carried out during the night and the bombing of all means of communication, lead to almost insupportable delays and lack of supplies. During the combat

up to the battle of Falaise, the main trouble of the Command was the supply of ammunition and fuel.<sup>15</sup>

Although diversity of units, competition between services, and a defective replacement system prevented the Germans from maintaining combat formations at authorized strengths, the difficulties of transportation comprised the most important reason for manpower shortages on the front. By the end of June, when the railroads were badly damaged by Allied air attack and all the Seine River bridges except those at Paris had been destroyed, barges moving on the Seine from Paris to Elbeuf and an 80 mile overland route for trucks and horse drawn wagons from Elbeuf to Caen formed perhaps the most dependable line of communications. All highways and other supply routes were overcrowded and in constant danger of Allied air attacks during daylight hours. Units traveling to reinforce the front had to move in several echelons, reload several times enroute and march a good part of the way on foot, mostly at night.<sup>16</sup>

Transportation difficulties also created supply and equipment shortages. At the beginning of July, the deficit in fuel amounted to over 200,000 gallons per day. Of daily requirements figured at 1,000 tons of ammunition, 1,000 tons of fuel and 250 tons of rations, only about 400 tons of all classes of supply could be brought to the front. That the quartermaster general of the west had to borrow 15 machine guns from the military governor of France in order to fill a request from the Cherbourg garrison illustrated into what straits German supply had fallen. For lack of dependable and long-distance railroad routes, armored divisions wore out valuable equipment on the



highways before getting to the combat area. The major highways to Normandy were littered with wrecked vehicles. Movement was possible only during darkness, and that at a snail's pace.<sup>17</sup>

Command, Control, and Communications Systems (The Germans) - Unhappily for every element of the German Armed Forces, the atmosphere brooding round their higher commanders sapped all traces of confidence. On the 20th of July an attempt to assassinate Hitler - the celebrated bomb plot - collapsed in fiasco. The Battle of Normandy came to a climax against the background of a witch hunt that undermined the judgement of every member of the German General Staff, whether they had been involved with the plotters or not. Rommel had been involved, but he was seriously wounded by an air attack on 17 July and eliminated from the command structure at a critical moment on all counts. From 20 July onwards no single field commander dared resist Hitler's will for to do so courted misinterpretation of loyalty followed by quick extinction. But already the leadership in the west had gone through a complete turnover. Rundstedt had been sacked and Rommel wounded before the Bomb Plot. Now Field-Marshal von Kluge filled both vacancies.<sup>18</sup>

In passing judgement, it is important to consider the interference of Hitler and of Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (OKW) in the strategic and tactical command down to the smallest elements, which increasingly made any clear-cut conduct of battle practically impossible. The mission was unyielding defense of the entire coastal front; no freedom of operation.<sup>19</sup>

Hitler thought he could carry through also in waging war the revolutionary principle he practiced everywhere of division of power and playing forces against each other to his own advantage. This led not only to a confused chain of command but to a command chaos. The military commanders of France were subordinated to OB West for military matters and to OKW for matters of administration and exploitation of the country for carrying out the war. Hitler wanted fluctuation in the chain of command; he did not want too much power concentrated in one hand.<sup>20</sup> He would never have supported a Supreme Commander, as was Eisenhower for the Allies.

Genfldm von Kluge, now commanding OB West and Army Group B, made his own conclusions where he should be and moved to Army Group B Headquarters. Thus he was separated not only physically but also mentally, from the real staff at OB West. As time went on, this separation was very injurious to the whole War in the West, for it was natural that the work of OB West was now done mainly by the staff of Army Group B. It was clear, nevertheless, that here lay the germ of a "dissension in command" which later gave rise to the ever-increasing general desire on the part of staffs and troops to bring Genfldm Von Runstedt back. The regular staff of OB West was thus, for the most part, eliminated from operational activities from 18 July until the beginning of September 1944.<sup>21</sup>

Intelligence (The Germans) - At the beginning of the operation German intelligence had failed. Radio interception had revealed significant changes in American dispositions during the week preceding COBRA, but these were

not reflected in the reports that reached army group and theater headquarters.<sup>22</sup>

Doctrine and Training/Condition and Morale/Leadership (The Germans) - In the Army Group B area there were only 6 Panzer divisions being reorganized or rehabilitated; 2, 21 and 116 Pz Divs, Pz Lehr Div, 1 SS Pz Div Leibstandarte and 12 SS Pz Div HitlerJugend. In France, south of the Loire, 9 & 11 Pz Divs and 2 and 17 SS Pz Divs were in the process of reorganization under LVIII Pz Corps. The cadres with combat experience were weak, materiel was still lacking in the main.<sup>23</sup>

On the Atlantic front, 2,000 km in round numbers, 23(?) "static" infantry divisions were committed. They consisted of personnel from old age classes, frequently without combat experience. Their training by out-dated leaders of all grades was not on the level of the task ahead. Materially they were quite inadequately equipped, similar to the type of infantry division at the end of WWI. Almost immobile and poorly horse-drawn, they could never be a match for a motorized, maneuverable foe if the fighting should become a war of movement.<sup>24</sup>

"The panzer divisions could not use their normal methods of fighting by movement because of the Allies Air Force and artillery. The Allied air-directed artillery at times was worse than the bombers. It was a mistake to leave armored divisions on the line but when you have no other forces and you know the panzer divisions have the best troops, what else can you do? We had no good infantry divisions and

the panzer divisions were then the best units left in the German army. The panzer divisions got the best recruits. The poor infantry could be put in some sectors of the Eastern Front but under the severe artillery fire of Normandy, we needed divisions of the best caliber; we no longer had any."<sup>25</sup>

"The condition of the German infantry was extremely bad. They had been in France for 2 or 3 years, and were completely spoiled. France is a dangerous country, with its wine, women and its pleasant climate. Troops who are there for any length of time became bad soldiers. They had done nothing but live well and send things home. The troops in France had been in the rear zone for years and, when thrown into combat, failed utterly. Furthermore, the best troops recruited had gone to the Luftwaffe, Paratroopers and the SS and no good replacements were ever sent to the infantry divisions. That is one reason why good panzer units had to be kept in the front line for an excessive length of time."<sup>26</sup>

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Military Objectives and Courses of Action - (See NOTE at end of subchapter)

The Allies - The heart of Germany was still a long way off for the United States and British and Canadian troops battling the Germans on the Channel coast of France on 1 July 1944. The invading armies of the Western Allies, with the help of other United Nations, had crossed the Channel to strike at the heart of Germany and destroy her armed forces. Their purpose: the liberation of western Europe. <sup>3</sup>/~~Two~~ months later, in September, after combat in the hedgerows, breakout, exploitation, and pursuit, the Allies were much closer to their goal. Having carried the battle across France, Belgium, Luxembourg, and the

Netherlands to the frontier of Germany-to within sight of the dragon's teeth along the Siegfried Line-the Allies seemed very close indeed.

The cross-Channel attack, launched from England on 6 June 1944, had accomplished the first phase of the invasion by 1 July. Ground troops had broken through the crust of the German coastal defenses and had also established a continental abutment for a figurative bridge that was to carry men and supplies from the United Kingdom to France. At the beginning of July the Allies looked forward to executing the second stage of the invasion: expanding their continental foothold to the size of a projected lodgment area.

Lodgment was a preliminary requirement for the offensive operations aimed toward the heart of Germany. Before the Allies could launch their definitive attack, they had to assemble enough men and material on the Continent to assure success. The plans that had shaped the invasion effort-OVERLORD and NEPTUNE-defined the boundaries of the lodgment area selected. Securing this region was the Allied objective at the beginning of July.

The lodgment area contemplated in the master plan consisted of that part of northwest France bounded on the north and the east by the Seine and the Eure Rivers and on the south by the Loire, an area encompassing almost all of Normandy, Brittany in its entirety, and parts of the ancient provinces of Anjou, Maine, and Orleans. Offering adequate maneuver room for ground troops and providing terrain suitable for airfields, it was within range of air and naval support based in England. Perhaps most important, its ocean coast line of



more than five hundred miles contained enough port facilities to receive and nourish a powerful military force. The Seine ports of Ronen and Le Havre, Cherbourg; St. Malo, Brest, Lorient, and Vannes in Brittany; St Nazaire and Nantes at the mouth of the Loire these and a number of smaller harbors had the capacity to handle the flow of men and materiel deemed necessary to bolster and augment the invasion.

The planners felt that Allied troops could take the lodgment area in three months, and in June the Allies had already secured a small part of it. After seizing the landing beaches, the troops pushed inland to a depth varying from five to twenty miles. They captured Cherbourg and the minor ports of ST. Vaast, Carentan, Isigny, and Grandcamp. They possessed a good lateral route of communications from Cherbourg, through Valognes, Careman, and Bayeux, toward Caen. Almost one million men, about 500,000 vehicles had arrived on the Continent.

Despite this impressive accomplishment, certain deficiencies were apparent. According to the planners' calculations, the Allies at the end of June would have held virtually all of Normandy within the confines of the lodgment area; in actuality, they occupied an area scarcely one fifth that size.

The perspective within which Operation COBRA was conceived was essentially the same as had bounded General Bradley's July offensive. The objectives remained unchanged: Brittany was the eventual goal, the first step toward it the Countances-Caumont line.

According to General Montgomery's instructions of the end of June, repeated in July, the First U.S. Army was to pivot on its left at Caumont and make a wide sweep to a north south line from Caumont to Fougères so that U.S. troops would eventually face east to protect the commitment of General Patton's Third Army into Brittany. To set the First Army wheeling maneuver into motion, General Bradley decided to breach the German defenses with a massive blow by VII Corps on a narrow front in the center of the army zone and to unhinge the German defenses opposing VIII Corps by then making a powerful armored thrust to Coutances. With the basic aim of propelling the American right (west) flank to Coutances, COBRA was to be both a breakthrough attempt and an exploitation to Coutances, a relatively deep objective in the enemy rear - the prelude to a later drive to the southern base of the Cotentin, the threshold of Brittany.

The word breakthrough, frequently used during the planning period, signified a penetration through the depth of the enemy defensive position. The word breakout was often employed later somewhat ambiguously or as a literary term to describe the results of COBRA and meant variously leaving the hedgerow country, shaking loose from the Cotentin, acquiring room for mobile warfare-goodbye Normandy, hello Brest.

Reporters writing after the event and impressed with the results stressed the breakout that developed rather than the breakthrough that was planned. Participants tended later to be convinced that the breakout was planned the way it happened because

they were proud of the success of the operation, perhaps also because it made a better story. In truth, Operation COBRA in its original concept reflected more than sufficient credit on those who planned, executed, and exploited it into the proportions in eventually assumed. COBRA became the key maneuver from which a large part of the subsequent campaign in Europe developed.

The Germans - German strategy in July was rooted in the events of June. When the Allies landed on the Normandy beaches on 6 June 1944, the Germans were without a firmly enunciated policy of defense. The OB WEST Commander, General-fieldmarshall Gerd Von Rundstedt, and the Army Group B commander, General-fieldmarshall Erwin Rommel, were in vague but basic disagreement on how best to meet the expected Allied invasion. Rundstedt tended to favor maintaining a strong strategic reserve centrally located so that after he determined the main invasion effort he would mass the reserve and destroy the Allies before they could reinforce their beachhead. Sometimes called the concept of mobile defense, that was a normal operational technique. Rommel presupposed Allied air superiority and he argued that the Germans would be unable to move a centrally located reserve to the battlefield since the Allies would control the air in that area; he believed it necessary to defeat the Allied invaders on the beaches. Sometimes called the concept of static defense, this theory gave impetus to the construction of the Atlantic Wall.

Hitler never made a final decision on which method of defense

he preferred. Consequently, neither method was established as a distinct course of action. By influence, it appeared that Hitler favored defense on the beaches since he had charged Rommel with specific responsibility for coastal defense even though the task might logically have belonged to the theater commander, Rundstedt. Although Rommel was subordinate to Rundstedt, he thus had a certain favored status that tended to undermine the chain of command. This was emphasized by the fact that he had direct access to Hitler, a privilege of all field marshals.

Despite a lack of cohesion in the command structure and an absence of coherence in defensive planning, the three commanders acted in unison when the Allies assaulted the beaches. Rommel gave battle on the coast, Rundstedt began to prepare a counterattack and Hitler approved the commitment of theater reserves.

As tactical plans for a Bayeux offensive were being readied and troops and supplies assembled, the British launched their attack toward Caen on 25 June. Almost at once the local commander defending Caen judged that he would have to evacuate the city. To retain Caen the Seventh Army on 26 June prepared to employ the troops assembling for the Bayeux offensive, not in the planned offensive mission but for defensive reasons, to counterattack the British. Before the commitment of this force, however, the situation eased and became somewhat stable. Nevertheless, German apprehension over the possibility of continued British attacks in the Caen sector did not vanish.

At this time not only the commanders in the west but also OKW passed from thinking in terms of offensive action to an acceptance of a defensive role. "No matter how undesirable this may be", Rundstedt informed OKW, "it may become necessary to commit all the new forces presently moving up in an effort to stop and smash...the British attack expected to start shortly southeast from Caen." So serious had the British threat appeared on 25 June that Rundstedt and Rommel fleetingly considered withdrawing to a line between Avranches and Caen.

By withdrawing to an Avranches-Caen line the Germans would have good positions from which to hold the Allies in Normandy. Yet such an act might also be interpreted by higher headquarters as the first step in a complete withdrawal from France. Keitel and Jodl had agreed soon after the invasion that if the Germans could not prevent the Allies from breaking out of their beachhead, the war in the west was lost. The point in question was a definition of the term beachhead. Would not a withdrawal from the lines already established give the Allies the space and maneuver room to launch a breakout attempt?

The alternatives facing the German field commanders late in June seemed clear; either the Germans should mount the Bayeux offensive and attempt to destroy the Allied beachhead in a single blow, or they should abandon hope of offensive action and defend aggressively by counterattacking the British near Caen. The British, by acting first, had temporarily nullified the possibility of offensive action, and this seemed to crystallize a growing pessimism

among the German commanders in the west.

On the afternoon of 1 July Hitler announced his position unequivocally and declared his willingness to gamble: "Present positions are to be held," he ordered. "Any further enemy breakthrough is to be hindered by determined resistance or by local counterattack. The assembly of forces will continue."

The Germans were to take advantage of the terrain, prevent the expansion of the Allied beachhead, and remain as close to the coast as possible.

NOTE: The material in ~~the remainder of this~~<sup>last sub-</sup> chapter was extracted from Martin Blumenson, Breakout and Pursuit, pp. 3, 4, 197, 20, 22, 24, 25, 27.

#### IV. THE BATTLE

Attack to Coutances - After disembarking at the Normandy beachhead, the 4th Armored Division was assigned to LTG Middleton's VIII Corps. Middleton, to the dismay of many armored warfare experts, placed the division on line so they could gain combat experience. This decision was to pay off handsomely in the near future.<sup>1</sup>

At the beginning of COBRA, the 4th Armored Division was just north of Periers. It and the 6th Armored Division constituted the VIII Corps exploiting force, which was to crush the German forces encircled by the VII Corps to the east. The VIII Corps attacked on 26 July, with the 8th and 90th Infantry Divisions leading. Fighting was bloody and slow on the 26th of July, but that night the majority of the German forces facing VIII Corps conducted a withdrawal. It took the American forces some time to react to their good fortune, when LTG Middleton, despite the numerous minefields left by the German LXXXIV Corps, decided to pass the 4th Armored Division through the 90th Infantry Division commencing at 0500 hours, 28 July.<sup>2</sup> Combat Command "B" (CCB), commanded by BG Holmes E. Dager, led the 4th Armored Division attack towards Coutances. The unit met little enemy opposition because the delay in getting the armored force forward had caused a break in contact with the enemy, and was further slowed by minefields near St. Saveur-Lendelin which had to be cleared. After a delay of about three hours, CCB, followed by CCA, then CCP, continued south and entered Coutances, the VIII Corps objective for over a month, that evening.

The narrow attack frontage, minefields, and lack of enemy resistance had allowed the division to attack in a single long column. It was unnecessary to deploy, although division scouts did screen to the front and flanks.

By the time of the 4th Armored Division attack, the German forces, disrupted by Allied bombing attacks and the encircling columns from VII Corps, were in full retreat. They narrowly escaped being cut off at Coutances. Additionally, Choltitz, the German LXXXIV Corps commander, had decided to leave his two Panzer divisions on line rather than pulling them back into reserve positions. Thus, his most mobile forces were heavily attrited and fully committed to the fight early in the battle. When the breakthrough occurred, he could not react quickly. Choltitz, was relieved on 28 July by General Lieutenant Elfeldt.<sup>4</sup> Small German units fought a spirited rearguard action in Coutances, but were crushed by the American armor. The enemy columns to the south were easy pickings for the fighter-bombers accompanying MG Wood's division. These aircraft also helped by providing reconnaissance and flank security to the division.

On to Avranches - Although the original VIII Corps objective was Coutances, General Bradley quickly saw that German resistance was breaking and ordered Middleton's VIII Corps on to Avranches, the key to both the Brittany Peninsula and continental France. The order was given by Gen. Patton who, although his 3rd Army would not be activated until 1 August, nonetheless had taken nominal command over VIII Corps as the Assistant Commander of Gen Bradley's 1st Army. This



arrangement suited MG Wood of the 4th Armored Division, who knew Patton well and whose division had served as a "test bed" for him in England.<sup>5</sup> In any case, the order was issued and CCB continued the attack south, securing Avranches on 30 July with light casualties and capturing both major bridges over the See River intact. That night, CCB had to fight for the bridges against isolated German units attempting to retreat. They had been unable to keep ahead of the fast-moving American columns despite a 30 hour head start. Prisoners became so numerous that in order not to slow the advance, Middleton told Wood to disarm the Germans and start them walking to the rear, unguarded.<sup>6</sup>

At this time, CCA, commanded by COL Bruce Clarke, was ordered to move southeast from Avranches and secure bridges and dams along the Selune River to facilitate the VIII Corps advance. Despite a hard fight at Ducey by elements of 5th SS Parachute Division, all objectives were taken by 1 August, including the key bridge at Pentaubault. This allowed a rapid crossing of this major obstacle by elements of 1st Army, and the newly constituted 3rd Army, and facilitated both the isolation of the Brittany Peninsula and the turning movement which later resulted in the Falaise Pocket.<sup>7</sup> The key to success in these actions was the ability of the leadership of the 4th Armored Division to take the initiative and move their units to critical points. They had overstocked with fuel and ammunition, even leaving their field kitchens behind, so the advance could be sustained. The division saw the need for speed and decisive action and took it.

CCB covered 68 kilometers in 3 days while CCA traveled 87 kilometers in four days.<sup>8</sup>

Distracted in Brittany - On 1 August, Gen Patton's 3rd Army was activated and assumed control of VIII Corps. That same day CCA was given the mission to seize the city of Rennes, the road hub of Brittany. At 1000 hours the command turned over the bridges and dams along the Selunne River to follow-on forces and commenced the advance southward with TF Kilpatrick and TF Abrams leading, and TF Bailey in reserve. All went smoothly until CCA reached the outskirts of Rennes, at which time the lead elements were hit by antitank fire. CCA deployed and blocked exits to the city. Both Middleton and Wood realized the division was not suited for urban warfare and refused to be pressured into piecemeal attacks. CCB and the remainder of the division joined CCA on 2 August and completed encirclement of the city. The action had been costly, with 14 tanks from CCA lost, primarily to the fires of German 88mm antiaircraft guns. Also, LTC Kirkpatrick was wounded and replaced by LTC Jaques. The Germans attempted to cripple the American effort with air strikes, but succeeded only in losing three irreplaceable aircraft.

On 2 August, MG Wood ordered his combat commands to be prepared to continue the pursuit of the fleeing Germans to the east. On 3 August CCA moved south to Bain-de-Bretagne, then sent elements back north to cut off German forces fleeing Rennes, killing or capturing many. CCB had moved even further south to Derval on its way to Chateaubriant, which would completely cut off German forces in

Brittany. By this time almost half of CCA's tanks were out of fuel, and the situation in CCB was nearly as bad. XIX Tactical Air Force reported an estimated Panzer division moving toward CCA, but luckily the large mass of American tanks caused the Panzer formation to withdraw. Fuel resupply occurred on 4 August and the situation was normalized.

The operation had been a success. The capital of Brittany was taken and the German troops in the province killed, captured, or isolated. Additionally the division learned a valuable lesson. From this point on it never moved without its trains.<sup>9</sup>

At this point, MG Wood received a great disappointment. Wood believed that the key to American success was to continue the attack to the east, pursuing the bulk of the German Army to its destruction. On the other hand, Patton and Bradley believed The Brittany ports were badly needed by the Allied effort and ordered VIII Corps west.<sup>10</sup> This may have been one of the great mistakes of the war. The Brittany ports were never used and the delay enabled German forces to reconstitute a viable defense.

At 1300 hours, 5 August, the 4th Armored Division moved west to seize the ports of Vannes and Lorient on the southern coast of Brittany. CCA rolled into Vannes that evening, surprising and ejecting a small enemy force, then continued through Auray and Hennebont to link up with CCB at Lorient.<sup>11</sup>

While CCA was at Vannes, CCB was moving to Lorient, arriving on 7 August to find it heavily defended. As the command attempted to maneuver to a point of enemy weakness, it came under artillery fire

near Pont-Scorff and took casualties. After linkup with CCA, Lorient was invested, but by 9 August, it became apparent that Lorient was too heavily defended and the 4th Armored Division was in danger of becoming caught up in a static battle. LTG Middleton told MG Wood not to take offensive action against the fortress, but Wood and his division were forced to remain there in defensive positions. In retrospect, taking Lorient may not have been an impossible task. After the war, the German commander stated that an early attack by a determined force could have overrun his disorganized defenses. Nonetheless, an armored division was a poor tool to use against an enemy-held city.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, contact with Free French Resistance Forces (FFI) had given the division locations of enemy batteries, road blocks, obstacles, and troop emplacements which showed a numerically superior, entrenched, and prepared enemy force of more than 25,000.

Until 9 August, the division continued a series of small probes of enemy defenses. This was frustrating to both Middleton and Wood, who perceived one of the great opportunities of the war being lost. Finally, on 9 August, Patton ordered Middleton to send a force to take the port of Nantes, expecting him to send an element of the 8th Infantry Division, at that time in Rennes. Instead, Middleton gave the mission to Wood.<sup>14</sup> At 1700 hours, CCA broke contact and returned to Vannes, where it reconstituted, moving to Nantes on 10 August. Although ordered not to get involved in a fight for the town by Middleton, French intelligence and the observed situation looked so

good that CCA attacked and took Nantes from a small enemy force on 12 August. At this time, the remainder of the division was still investing Lorient.

From 1-12 August, the 4th Armored Division, fighting against elements of the German XXX Corps, took almost 5,000 prisoners and destroyed or captured almost 250 enemy vehicles, with the loss of 98 KIA, 362 WIA, 11 MIA, and 15 tanks.<sup>15</sup> Despite these impressive figures, the 4th Armored Division had been going in the wrong direction; however, it was now time for the division to get back on the track of the retreating German army.

Drive to the Seine - On 13 August, the day after CCA's capture of Nantes, MG Wood received orders that transferred the 4th Armored Division from VIII Corps to LTG Cook's XII Corps. On 15 August he turned Lorient over to elements of the 6th Armored Division and moved east to join the rest of the division.<sup>16</sup>

On 14 August, CCA was ordered to move to St. Calais, where the division was to assemble for an attack on Orleans. CCA made the move of 167 miles in 22 hours. Without waiting for the remainder of the division, CCA continued the attack to Ormes, where it met enemy resistance. After deploying, CCA overran what turned out to be a intact German airfield complete with some planes, which were destroyed. On 16 August at 1100 hours, TF Bailey, lead task force of CCA, entered Orleans, where they captured or killed a large number of SS officers and Gestapo agents. By 1500 hours, the city was secured and turned over to elements of the 35th Infantry Division.<sup>17</sup> The ability of the armored division to move long distances and be successfully thrown directly into combat was again demonstrated. The speed of movement and ferocity of the attack was such that the few

Germans rearguard units, mostly from the 708th Division, had no time to prepare proper defenses. Once again, by pushing forward ruthlessly, often without maps and nothing but a general idea of where the objective was, the 4th Armored Division had won a victory with minimal casualties.<sup>18</sup> From 17-20 August, the division had a much needed rest in order to permit refitting and consolidation of forces, and on 20 August, when the division received orders to spearhead the advance of XII Corps, it was ready.

On 21 August, the division moved out to attack Sens, then continue to Troyes, on the Seine River. CCA was in the north, crossing the Loing River at Souppes against light resistance and secured Sens at 1600 hours. The next day was spent clearing the city and preparing to continue the attack. The night of 22 August, the 51st SS Brigade advanced from Troyes and prepared positions close to Sens. Under strong artillery support, a task force from CCA (TF Oden) attacked the enemy frontally to drive him out of his positions, then hit him on the northern flank, killing 196 Germans and capturing 268.<sup>19</sup>

At this time, CCB had been moving to the south, cooperating closely with 35th Infantry Division. On 22 August, CCB attacked through Courtnay and captured Montargis, on the Loing River, in the face of heavy enemy opposition. Although the bridge at Motargis was destroyed, by 25 August, CCB was again on the move, attacking through

St. Florentin and Auxon. On 28 August, CCB crossed the Seine River at Piney and secured the XII Corps and Third Army right flank.<sup>20</sup>

CCA commenced its movement towards the Seine River on 24 August with an advance toward Troyes. Facing the combat command were what remained of the 51st SS Brigade, light AA units, two light field artillery battalions, and other assorted units. That evening, while one task force cut off escape to the north, the rest of CCA, supported by artillery, took the city. Troyes was secured by 1830 hours at the cost of only one half track. Bridging operations were completed across the Seine River that night and the combat command consolidated at 0800 hours, 25 August. As German forces attempted to flee to the south, they were caught and destroyed by U. S. fighter-bombers.<sup>21</sup>

By 26 August, Troyes was secure. A force of 800 had defeated over 3,000 entrenched enemy soldiers, killing or capturing 1100, including three general officers.<sup>22</sup> The value of the speed and shock action of armored and motorized infantry forces had again been shown. The Seine River had been crossed, German forces were retreating in disarray, and the way to the heart of Germany looked open.

Push to the Moselle and the Tyranny of Logistics - The allies reached the Seine on D + 79 rather than D + 90 as the original OVERLORD plan had envisioned. Only a single port, Cherbourg, was opened and the French railroad system was a shambles. On 25 August, the famous Red Ball Express began operation between St. Lo and Chartres (until 10 September) with transportation beyond to be the responsibility of unit

vehicles. With the 4th Armored Division over 100 miles east of Chartres, resupply of fuel soon became critical. Before long, artillery and engineer vehicles were being used to haul fuel, but even this was not enough.<sup>23</sup> It became a question of how far the spearheads could push before they broke down or ran out of fuel.

On 28 August, with CCB still guarding the Corps right flank at the Seine River near Piney, CCA began an advance in two parallel columns with TF Jaques on the right attacking to seize a bridgehead across the Marne River at Vitry, and TF Abrams on the left attacking to seize a bridgehead at Chalons-sur-Marne. For this attack in two widely separated objectives, CCA was reinforced with an extra infantry company, a medium tank company, and an armored engineer company.<sup>24</sup>

By 1400 hours, TF Jaques was prepared to attack Vitry when their infantry discovered a ford across the Marne River. Their engineers then bridged a parallel canal at a destroyed lock. Reconnaissance of Vitry showed it to be lightly held, and prior to noon the next day Vitry was cleared of enemy forces.

TF Abrams forded the Marne at Germaine, fighting a short yet sharp battle with the students of a German NCO School at Marson, then turned north towards Chalons, where it cut off a column of retreating Germans. Just prior to dark, TF Abrams made contact with the 80th Infantry Division, which was on the west bank of the Marne River and had also been given the mission of capturing Chalons. At daylight on 29 August, TF Abrams and a combat team from the 80th Division approached the outskirts of the city where they were met by the mayor and a welcoming delegation. The Germans had completely evacuated



Chalons during the night.<sup>25</sup>

At 0700 hours, 30 August, CCA continued its attack with its objective being to seize additional crossing sites over the Marne River near St. Dizier and seize the high ground northeast of the town. CCA moved south in a single column with its right flank protected by the Marne River and its left flank screened by the division cavalry. As the column approached St. Dizier, it was brought under intense artillery fire. CCA deployed and immediately assaulted the town, opposed by the elements of the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division, which was moving into defensive positions along the Marne River. CCA's sudden attack caught the Germans by surprise, prevented adequate defensive preparations, destroyed 24 pieces of artillery, and forced the Germans to withdraw. By 2000 hours, the city was cleared and the high ground to the northeast was secured. Again, the aggressive movement and actions upon contact of the 4th Armored Division had frustrated German defensive efforts.<sup>26</sup>

CCB was still at Piney, guarding the Corps flank until 31 August when it moved to the Marne River north of Joinville and supported Co B, 24th Armored Engineer Battalion, which spanned the Marne River while under fire.<sup>27</sup> CCB then continued its advance to the Meuse River, capturing Vancouleurs and seizing a bridgehead on the eastern bank of the river on the evening of 1 September.<sup>28</sup>

At 0700 hours, 31 August, CCA began to move toward the next major water obstacle, the Meuse River. The combat command was to seize a bridgehead across the river at Commercy. CCA again moved out in a single column with TF Abrams leading, and made rapid progress

despite frequent contact with small enemy units. At 1125 hours, with a light rain falling and extremely limited visibility, the lead elements of TF Abrams charged into Commercy, catching the German forces completely by surprise and seizing all three bridges before a shot could be fired at them. The antitank guns guarding approaches to the town were unmanned, and an entire German company was caught at breakfast in its mess hall.

By 1300 hours, Commercy was secured and CCA held the high ground east of the town, blocking all approaches from that direction. That night, elements of an SS division attacked CCA but were repulsed. The next morning, a counterattack conducted by TF Jaques caught the remaining German forces in a defile and destroyed them as a fighting unit.<sup>29</sup>

The 4th Armored Division then continued its advance to the Moselle River. The entire division was out of fuel, but by drawing the fuel from abandoned and nonessential vehicles, the division was able to reach the west bank. At that point, exhausted, out of maps, and completely out of fuel, the 4th Armored Division could not force a crossing of the Moselle River and its advance, along with the advance of the remainder of Patton's Third Army, stalled until 12 September when the units could be resupplied and reconstituted.

Key Events - The 4th Armored Division's participation in COBRA and the resulting pursuit of German forces through France had several key events. First, Middleton's decision to commit the armored force early caused an increase in pace of the breakout to which the Germans were

unable to react, allowing a rapid advance to Avranches and the capture of three key bridges, as well as destroying the cohesiveness of the German defense. The turn west into Brittany was, in retrospect, a mistake and may have allowed the Germans time to regroup and reform their defense. Luckily for the Allies, Hitler's unwillingness to surrender territory lost his forces the advantages which could have been gained by this respite.

Middleton's decision to commit CCA to capture Nantes, ignoring Patton's guidance, got 4th Armored Division back into a position to kick off an attack to the east, which Patton then allowed by transferring the division to XII Corps, starting their drive to the Seine River. In the attack to the Seine, the division was able to continue its rapid rate of movement by capturing key bridges on the Loing and Seine Rivers, and was able to defeat the German forces before they could form a coherent defense.

The next key event was CCA's fording of the Marne River near Chalons normally impossible, and a move which caught German forces completely by surprise. The rapid movement continued, with CCA then seizing three bridges across the Meuse River, the next major obstacle to the American advance. The final key event was the inability of the division, for logistical reasons, to continue its rapid advance past the Moselle River.

Conclusions - Although the pursuit was finally brought to a halt at the Moselle River, a clear victory had been won. Never had a force advanced with such rapidity. France was cut in two, much of the

German Army had been destroyed or cut off, and the surviving German forces, very depleted, were in full retreat. The 4th Armored Division normally did not outnumber their opponents, and their tanks were inferior in firepower to first line German models; however, the ability of the division's leadership to fully exploit its mobility and shock power, combined with the coordinated use of Army Air Force assets, allowed the combat commands to repeatedly achieve surprise and to defeat superior forces with minimal friendly casualties. The enemy was never allowed the opportunity to regroup and the division was able to continue a rapid advance across France.

The German forces were defeated by COBRA due to the lack of a mobile, large reserve and, of possibly greater importance, Hitler's order prohibiting yielding ground to the enemy. This order forced the German commanders to commit their forces piecemeal on often unfavorable terrain and led to the disorganization which permitted the rapid advance of Allied forces.

## ENDNOTES

1. Martin Blumenson, Breakout and Pursuit (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1961), pp. 315-316.
2. Russell Weigley, Eisenhower's Lieutenants (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), p. 158.
3. LTC Hal C. Pattison, "Operations of Combat Command A, 4th Armored Division, From the Normandy Beachhead to the Meuse River, 28 July to 31 August, 1944," paper presented at the U. S. Army Command and General Staff College Regular Course, Fort Leavenworth, KS 1946-1947, p.5.
4. Blumenson, Breakout and Pursuit, pp. 328-329.
5. Weigley, Eisenhower's Lieutenants, p. 172.
6. Ibid., p. 174
7. Pattison, "Operations of Combat Command A", p.8.
8. Weigley, Eisenhowers Lieutenants, p. 174.
9. Pattison, "Operations of Combat Command A", pp. 13-14.

- 10 Blumenson, Breakout and Pursuit, p. 362.
11. Pattison, "Operations of Combat Command A", p. 18.
12. Blumenson, Breakout and Pursuit, p. 364.
13. Pattison, "Operations of Combat Command A", p 19.
14. Blumenson, Breakout and Pursuit, p. 366.
15. CPT Kenneth Koyen, The Fourth Armored Division (Munich: Herder-Druck, 1946), p. 26.
16. Blumenson, Breakout and Pursuit, p. 367.
17. Pattison, "Operations of Combat Command A," pp. 27-28.
18. Blumenson, Breakout and Pursuit, p. 566.
- 19 Pattison, "Operations of Combat Command A", pp. 31-32.
20. U.S. Army, 4th Armored Division, After-Action Report for Period 17 July to 31 August, 1944, by MAJ Lowell A. Spires (A.P.O. 254: Headquarters, 4th Armored Division, 1944), pp. 3-4.
21. Pattison, "Operations of Combat Command A", pp. 34-37.

22. Ibid., pp. 38-39.

23. Weigley, Eisenhower's Lieutenants, pp. 269-27

24. Pattison, "Operations of Combat Command A", pp. 40-41.

25. Ibid., pp. 42-43.

26. Ibid., pp. 44-46.

27. U.S. Army, Company B, 24th Armored Engineer Battalion, 4th Armored Division, After-Action Report for Period 01 August to 31 August 1944 (ETO: Headquarters, 24th Armored Engineer Battalion, 1944), p. 5.

28. U.S. Army, 4th Armored Division After Action Report, p. 5.

29. Pattison, "Operations of Combat Command A," pp. 47-48.

## V. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ACTION

Significance of the Action - The real significance of the action during "Operation COBRA" was that it demonstrated the strengths, coordination abilities, innovation, determination and the fighting spirit of the United States forces. The action forced the German armies into an almost all out retreat across France culminating at the Seine River and prevented the Germans from accomplishing a coordinated defense or conducting significant counter attacks until the Allies outdistanced their logistical tail and were forced to slow down their push to a crawl and, in cases, to a sudden halt.

The 4th Armored Division was a true representation of determination, innovation and fighting spirit. During the Normandy landing, breakout and deep drive, the division demonstrated to the German forces that the trim armored organization was exceptionally strong, fast and had the tenacity of an insulted bulldog. The ratio of German casualties and equipment losses compared to the division's was significantly in the U.S. favor and the thousands of German POWs taken demonstrated the true effectiveness of the Armored division's speed and strength.

Some historians feel that the battle fought during the latter part of August may have been one of the decisive battles of the war because had we failed it is entirely conceivable that the Allies would have lost the initiative which may have proven disastrous due to the length of the supply pipeline and the German army reserve near the Pas de Calais peninsula which could have been committed in a counterattack



if the German defense had held. The key point here is that the 4th Armored Divisions initial attack out of the Normandy beachhead and follow-on successes gave the 3rd Army the ability to rout the German Armies out of France. In fact, had the Falaise-Argentan Gap been closed it would have prevented the escape of a significant amount of German soldiers and equipment that would be used to fight our forces again.

While the success of the 4th Armored Division was significant, there were other happenings during "Operation COBRA" that were less than cheery. Based upon failures during the breakout, the use of heavy bombers in support of tactical operations fell out as a sound tactic. Coordinated combined arms operations fire support and air cover effectiveness needed improving, but the American units learned from their mistakes and their experience paid off in the long run.

The vast numbers of German personnel losses and equipment losses coupled with a liberated France tend to be the most significant happening or outcome that could not have occurred without the success of "Operation COBRA". However, our contention is that the real significance of this operation was the planning, execution and continuation of an allied initiative that was not to be stopped, although slightly delayed, until the fall of Germany.

Lessons Learned - 1. Artillery support and operations were outstanding during the operation and significantly influenced the U.S. forces in accomplishing the objective.

2. Logistics while not a problem early on became a nightmare as the combat forces relentlessly pursued the Germans across France. The long supply pipeline coupled with operational German combat forces that had been bypassed by U.S. combat forces created a significant problem in distribution which eventually led to the slow down and halt near the German border.

3. Command and control problems existed due to the rapidly changing situations which evolved into lengthy message passing times. It took 24 to 36 hours to get a message transmitted and acknowledged from the Corps to the Division. In fact, the division commander was forced to frequently act independently due to the rapidly changing situations.

4. The large amount of prisoners of war taken was unexpected and created problems for the U.S. forces. German leaders were used to march the men to the rear so the lead combat forces could press the attack.

5. During the break through and breakout excessive mileage and hours were placed upon equipment. Consequently, is difficult to estimate how much of a maintenance effort was required.

6. Combined arms operations and combined air operations were problem areas initially, but with experience, combined operations improved and were ultimately very successful.

7. Combined aerial and armored reconnaissance proved to be totally effective in a fast moving, fluid situation.

8. The mobility of the American forces allowed them to swing the direction of attack at will. This mobility allowed for the quick run across France, but it also created the logistics problems.

9. The prior training of the 4th Armored Division proved to be the paramount factor in their almost unbelievable success. Their performance under fire was unique and totally effective.

10. More night attacks and night air reconnaissance may have prevented a German force from escaping through the Falaise pocket.

11. The need to start the initiative and to maintain it requires independent decisions made by sound leaders as the communications system proved inadequate during the operation. Once the initiative is gained do not lose it, even if it means gambling with a long supply pipeline.

12. All the planning required is totally necessary but it must provide flexibility. There cannot be one plan. All contingencies must be considered and in this type of operation, the force with the initiative must be innovative and prepared to exploit presented opportunities.

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